Season 11: Episode 4 | Malcolm Guite | What if Creativity Could Kindle the Imagination for Christ?

Hello and welcome to Scripture Untangled, a podcast by the Canadian Bible Society. My name is Joanna la Fleur. I'm a friend of the Canadian Bible Society and I'm going to be your guide for today's episode.

Today we are bringing you a conversation between CBS ambassador, Reverend Dr. Andrew Stirling and Malcolm Guite. Malcolm Guite is an English poet, singer-songwriter, Anglican priest, and academic. Guite earned degrees from Cambridge and Durham Universities, and his research interests include the intersection of religion and the arts and the examination of the works of people you may know like J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Owen Barfield, as well as British poets such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

He was a bi-fellow and chaplain of Girton College in Cambridge and associate chaplain of St. Edward King and Martyr College at Cambridge. On several occasions he has taught as visiting faculty at colleges and universities in England and as well in North America. Malcolm Guite is the author of five books of poetry as well as a number of books on Christian faith and theology and he's stated that his aim in his writing is to be profound without ceasing to be beautiful.

He performs as a singer and guitarist in a Cambridgeshire-based rhythm and blues and rock band called Mystery Train and he also has a YouTube channel where he shares his passions with 156,000 subscribers and his channel has seen millions of views. So, enjoy this conversation.

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Andrew Stirling: Well Malcolm, I'm absolutely delighted that you could join us on this podcast with Scripture Untangled and from your location in the UK and me here in Toronto, it's so wonderful that we can connect across the Atlantic in this meaningful way. To give us a sense Malcolm of who you are and so our audience might get a taste of who is Malcolm Guite, briefly tell us and our audience something about your background and particular emphasis, I love this part, on your family heritage and growing up in Africa and your name.

Malcolm Guite: Well thank you very much Andrew, it's great to be on the podcast with you.

I belong to the Bible Society here and I honour and pray for its work so it's very good to be part of the Canadian Bible Society event, not least because I have a Canadian hinterland as you'll hear, but yes I'm known as Malcolm Guite but Malcolm is actually my middle name and my full name is Ayodeji Malcolm Guite, so I used to be called Ayo for short at home. Ayodeji is a Yoruba name, and it means joy again or the second joy, Ayo is joy, Deji is encore as it were, and I acquired that name. My father was a professor of classics but also a Methodist local preacher and he was working at the University of Ibadan when I was born there in '57.

As it happened it was a difficult birth, there were sort of complications and it was the Yoruba nurse who noticed the crisis and then ran and fetched, just as he was leaving the compound, the one doctor who could sort this out and save both mine and my mother's lives. So my mother quite properly asked her to name me and Ayodeji is a traditional name for a second child, which I am, but also I think there was a sense that rather like in the Scripture she forgets her pains for the joy that she brought a child into the world, I was a joy that nearly didn't happen but happened again. So yeah, so I like that and I guess, I mean I've heard this phrase third culture kids, I mean I spent my first seven years in Nigeria, although we came back to England each year in the summer, but then again three years in Zimbabwe or Rhodesia as it was then, and so I

have this African childhood and I think as I say this, this phrase third culture kids, maybe that has always given me a slightly different purchase or perspective, you know, that in any other culture I've been, I've always had this other possibility.

Although I think in terms of how I was brought up and my father's sense of what Christianity is and the gospel, I think my father by that experience was much more able than some of his contemporaries to make the distinction between Christ and culture, not to mistake, you know, pointy steeples and Wesley hymns for the only expression of Christianity, you know, he'd seen the drums and dance in Nigeria and he realized that Christ will bring both flourishing and a discernment, a judgment, but also flourishing and fulfillment to every culture in which he is known and proclaimed. So, I think I was fortunate in that sense that I wouldn't, nobody as it were absolutized the rapping in which you happen to find the gospel in Christ. For me Christ was the absolute, not the cultural trapping's, lovely as they may be.

Andrew Stirling: Fascinating. It's very true Malcolm, but in terms of your growing up and growing up in this sort of almost multicultural area, you went through somewhat of a movement I understand away from the faith for a while and you were influenced by the likes of what Jean-Paul Sartre and so on. So, what led you to a spiritual awakening to become a writer and a poet and what effect did they have on you?

Malcolm Guite: Well okay, so I count myself very fortunate to have been brought up in a Christian household and my father was a very strong, clear and articulate believer and one of the things he believed and taught me from an early age that there was no distinction to be made between the sacred and the secular.

If God was God and omnipresent then everything whatsoever you do, you know, you do it to the glory of God whether you're playing cricket or writing a poem or preaching a sermon, it makes no odds whether there are five people there or 500. You're doing this as God's creature to reflect glory back to him. So, I grew up with that, and I grew up with, you know, the stories of Jesus and all of those things and

have very much a sense, I look back on it now, I think I did sense the divine presence around me.

But obviously part of growing up and part of education is to challenge the narratives with which you've been brought up, and also one tends to be doing this in the midst of adolescence. I had a quite stormy adolescence. I think I have quite a lot of highs and lows even now, but then they were quite extreme and there came a point we'd moved to Canada in '67, the glorious year of the centennial.

I remember we were there at Expo 67 in Montreal, but I was 10 or 9 going on 10. Anyway, I, of course, absorbed Canadian culture and loved it and, you know, when I was old enough to begin buying records of my own, I bought sort of Neil Young. But my dad was afraid I was losing my British identity and also, he wasn't happy with the standard of Canadian schools as he perceived them then compared with his rosy memories of, you know, of his grammar school in Cambridge.

So, he, with our, you know, with our agreement, he sent me and my sister off to be educated in England in '71 which meant boarding school, of course, and I'd never really been that far from home. So, I was at a very good school. It was mainly a large day school, all boys school, academically selective.

It was excellent from the point of view of the education I got, but it had a small and rather dysfunctional boarding house of about 70 boys which was a miserable place, and I was very homesick. So I kind of, going through that was, you know, made me sort of doubt everything really and then I was exposed pretty early both by the teaching and by the reading to this sort of more, you know, the kind of modern enlightenment narrative of a very secularizing kind which says, look, before we invent, before we discover the scientific method, people would believe anything their grandmothers told them and, you know, religion is like fairy tales, it's from the childhood of humanity but now we must dare to know and must grow up and we must boldly and resolutely and without fear follow where the scientific evidence leads. And if the scientific evidence suggests that there is absolutely no meaning of

purpose in anything in the universe and that we are really just the self-replication of a selfish gene or the unwinding of an enzyme, then live with it, suck it up.

So, I began to take on this very reductive... reductive in the sense that, you know, I still experienced pangs of longing and beauty and all of that stuff but I was constantly chiding myself for thinking there was any significance in that and saying this is really just a kind of evolutionary behavior or even when I got right down to the niches of it, I very much wanted to be a scientist, you know. I'd learned, I was very proud of learning the word epiphenomenon, you know, which means something that an appearance that's thrown up but is not central. So, the idea that consciousness and with consciousness love, art, culture, beauty were mere epiphenomena thrown up by the random concatenation of atoms in our brain and the inevitable, on Newtonian principles, inevitable action and reaction which couldn't have significance because it had no alternatives.

I do that and now philosophically the people who seem to get that clearly and live bravely on, you know, trying to make their own meaning on the edge of the void were the existentialists. And when we got into the about 16 or so, we started reading them in French. It was a very good school.

So, I began to read, I read Huy-Clos, you know. I read Huy-Clos by the way, I look back on it now and Sartre says the exact opposite of the truth because that's where he says l'enfer c'est les autres, you know, hell is other people.

Andrew Stirling: Yes, hell is other people, yeah.

Malcolm Guite: And actually no, the hell is the enclosed self-incapable of loving and communicating with others.

Andrew Stirling: Right.

Malcolm Guite: Salvation is always other people.

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I mean, whenever two or three are gathered in my name, you know, I saw a huge multitude which no man can number. So, I dive deep into that, and I was rescued from it not by, you know, anybody slapping my wrists or the admonitions of anybody, but actually by a visit to Keats' house in Hampstead Heath. I was taken there by an aunt, and I didn't want to go.

I didn't know who Keats' was, although I'd absorbed a lot of poetry without knowing who it was by because my mother was always reciting poetry. But anyway, I read Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale*. I was very, very, you know, moody and resentful at the time, but you may remember that poem.

It's not a Christian poem by any stretch of the imagination, though it does have an extraordinary Scriptural moment in it, which proved very significant. Anyway, that poem begins, it's probably the most unpromising opening of any English poem, you see, because, you know,

> *"My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains*
>
> *My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,*
>
> *Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains*
>
> *One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk"*

So, I'm going like, ache, pain, leafy, drunk.

You know, you had me on ache. So, I just, you know, like, if the poem had ended there, I would have said that just totally expresses how I feel right now. But of course, the poem doesn't end there, you know, he hears the Nightingale, doesn't he? And suddenly the poem literally takes wing, and he says, you know,

> *"Tis not to envy of thy happy lot,*
>
> *But being too happy in thine happiness, -*

Too happy in thine happiness, he's right out of the self now.

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"That thou, light-winged dryad of the trees,

In some melodious plot

Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,

Singest of summer in full-throated ease."

You know, the move from one to the other, and I was just borne up, I thought, what was that? That was just astonishing. So, I carried on reading the poem, it was written, it was printed up on the wall of the room where you could see the casements opening on the tree where the Nightingale had sung. And you may remember, I mean, it gets more and more intensely beautiful as he goes out, and he contemplates his mortality and contrasts it with something beyond, something transcendent, symbolized by the song of the bird, you know,

"Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird!"

And then comes, in this increasing sensual intensity about, you know,

"I cannot tell what flowers are at my feet,...

But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet."

Suddenly, out of nowhere, appears the figure of Ruth. And he imagines that perhaps Ruth heard this song, that this song, as he says,

...Found a path

Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,

She stood in tears amid the alien corn;

Going like, whoa, you know, vague memories of Sunday school. But actually, I realized, I kind of finally admitted to myself, it wasn't cool as a teenager who's supposed to be a rebel, to admit he was actually sick for home. But I was.

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But I kind of knew from that poem, because it's constantly pushing towards the immortal and transcendent, even in the midst of mortality, that the home I was sick for wasn't just my home in Canada. And then, of course, you remember, straight after that comes the image, the extraordinary, moving, numinous thing, where he says, "the song of the nightingale, not only is heard by Ruth," but he says,

> *"It has charmed open magic casements, opening on the foam*
>
> *Of perilous seas in faery lands forlorn."*

So right at the back of the poem, there's these windows opening on something numinous and magical.

So, I read this poem many times, because my aunt was going around the thing, you know, reading all the labels, and I knew, and for me, this one poem was enough. And when I came out of there and thought about it, and started reading, you know, B.F. Skinner's *Reductive Science and Sartre* again, I actually thought this won't do. Whatever happened in that house, whatever happens when I read this poem, of course, it must have an electrochemical component, of course, synapses are firing, and there is a physical manifest of this.

But it is not exhausted by its physical manifest, there is something more. There's a pleroma, there's an overflow. So that, as it were, put a big crack in the kind of concrete that I'd been pouring over my deeper self, in an attempt to reduce it all.

So, after that, I was open to the spiritual, and it took some years, you know, that probably happened in 75 or 76, and it wasn't until late 79 that I became a Christian. But one of the other things it did for me, which is a permanent good from that, which is I wanted to be a poet, and I am a poet now, if you like, because of John Keats and because reading that poem. So, I ended up switching from science to literature, and I won a scholarship to read, let's just do a degree in English literature in Cambridge, which I took up in 77.

And I'd become really interested, I'd begun to read Dante, I'd become interested in medieval literature, so I went right the other way. And of course, all medieval and Renaissance literature is Christian, by default. So, in those days, Cambridge was, you know, I mean, perhaps it still is, sort of serious about your background reading, and everybody was sent a reading list before they came up.

And the first two books on the English faculty reading list back in the day, were the Bible in the King James Version, and the Book of Common Prayer. On the basis, not that you were to pay any attention to the deeper meanings, but you need to be familiar with these texts. This was background reading, because so much of great English literature is drawn from and depends on them.

No, I was a bit familiar with the Bible, so I took the reading list seriously and began to do the reading. And of course, as you will know, and anybody, you know, who's spent long with the Bible will know, you may decide at the outset, that this is background reading, but it doesn't stay in the background. You know, it's an active, the Word of God is active and living, and won't, as it were, allow itself entirely to be pigeonholed.

So, the book begins to kind of react with you in different ways. I mean, I was taking it that the book, that this is a book that reads us.

Andrew Stirling: Yes, right.

Malcolm Guite: As we read it. And in fact, I should show you, I've got a poem that kind of seeding, saying that I've got a poem called *The Lectern* about reading from the Bible. So that was beginning to have an effect.

There were lots of other things that had to happen, including a fairly dramatic moment when I did sense God's presence in the room. But that happened as it happens also in the presence of Scripture. I was really studying Renaissance, well, studying English poetry in the 16th and 17th century, obviously looking at the likes of George Herbert and, you know, obviously Shakespeare's sonnets, but the beautiful

versions of the Psalms that Philip Sidney and his sister made, their influences on Herbert.

So, I decided I had to, and also, I was in the habit of reading poetry out loud to express my own feelings. And I happened to be going through a very bad patch and feeling quite sort of sad and angry at the same time. So, I was reading aloud in a house completely on my own.

I was house sitting for someone in London, you know, left the house. I was reading from Coverdale's translation in the Book of Common Prayer of the Psalms. It was Psalm 145, in fact, that I was reading.

And of course, there's extraordinary verses that say the Lord is near to all who fall, but also the Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon him. But I was reading this, as I say, as partly background research and partly just, I'd been reading the earlier Psalms of Implication because they expressed my feelings of, you know. I've been in Psalm 88 at various points in my life. Used it, you know, my friends and my lovers, my acquaintance, that's put far from me, you know, there's no nevertheless in that.

But anyway, I was on this extraordinary Psalm that really initiates the five great Psalms of Praise with which the Psalter concludes. And one minute I was doing this thing under my control. I was in the room, I was, as it were, the centre as one always is in one's own perspective, like it or not, you know, you see the world radiating around you.

And in an empty room, in an empty house, and then the next minute, even as I'm reading this Psalm, not by some kind of logical deduction from the Psalm, it's almost, I was no longer in an empty room, I mean, and I was no longer at the centre. I had this inexorable sense of an undeniable and holy presence. And instead of feeling like there was, this was, you know, God is a verbal construct as Wittgenstein has demonstrated, you know, which I might have said, you know, sort of, you know, in a

horrible snobby way, intellectually snobby way, instead of saying that I realised Guite only existed because of the Word of this One.

If anybody was a verbal construct, and that in fact, far from being at the centre, I was way, way, way off from the edge, kind of dangling by a thread. And I could neither look at this holy presence, nor could I look away for fear that the thread would break, you know, and I would just disappear into the void of which I'd been so proud of speaking into. And, you know, it was very dramatic and quite terrifying in the same way.

I mean, sometime later, you know, in my gradual reading of the Scriptures, as per the instructions, I read in Isaiah six, you know, "in the year that King Isaiah died, I saw the Lord mighty and lifted up and His train filled the temple." And you remember, Isaiah doesn't say, wow, you know, I've had a religious experience, I must start a cult in California, I must be. He doesn't say that, he says, woe is me.

I should so not be here, you know, I'm the man of unclean lips. So that was, I was in this kind of woe is me, but there is an undeniable presence. And eventually it didn't go, I was waiting for it to go away, but it didn't.

So, I couldn't bear being, you know, as soon as these people got back to their house, I fled back up to college before term started, hoping that I would leave this thing behind me. But of course, it didn't. And then eventually, you know, I went and saw the college chaplain.

I mean, you have to be desperate to do that. As I know, the college chaplain myself and he's a very wise man. And he pointed out to me that, well, he, first of all, he said, of course this has happened. And of course, you're in trouble because you've taken the name of the Lord in vain.

You've spoken the Holy Name, and you've used words which are addressed to God and which call on Him and say He is near without believing a word of them. And you

know, what you have summoned, what you've disbelieved in, you have summoned, and you have to deal with the consequences.

But he pointed out to me that clearly the Psalms were the key. And had it ever occurred to me that the best thing was to go back to the Psalter at the beginning and say them to this presence. And it hadn't occurred to me.

And he said, well, I do this morning and evening, nobody comes, but you know, I say morning prayer and evening prayer according to the book of common prayer with the full readings from the Psalter. Why don't you come and join me? And I did that, you know, term hadn't started yet. I did this quite, and then he said another thing that's very, this brilliant man.

He said, look, I need to warn you of something because he said, I will say at the end of every Psalm, I will say the Doxology, I will say glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was and meaning is now and ever shall be. And he says, I forbid you to say that, because, you know nothing of the Son and the Spirit and you're in enough trouble as it is already.

Andrew Stirling: Wow. Wow. Tough talk.

Malcolm Guite: Of course, I mean, you know, I was an intelligent man who read lots of Christian books, which I could have discoursed to him on Trinitarian theology, but he wasn't interested in that. He was interested in a real-life encounter at death with the Son and the Spirit. So, he said, don't mess with that.

I found saying, sorry, it's a long answer to a short question, but I said the Psalms, and I found that while I was saying it, it was tolerable to be there. And in fact, in the end, it was a joyful thing to be there, that these were words this Holy Presence had given me to say back to him. And it's like completing a circuit.

It was like, you know, so this became really profound for me. And then sometime later, very fortunately, I was taken by a friend, actually, a Roman Catholic friend to

hear a speaker at the Catholic chaplaincy who was a Franciscan friar. And again, he presented it to me as background research.

He said, look, most of the medieval literature we're studying, you know, it was the movement of the friars in both the Dominicans and the Franciscans who really founded the universities. And the whole thing we're doing started with these guys preaching. And there's one of these guys that's still around.

What's it like about hearing him? So, it was coming up towards Christmas. Anyway, he, this preacher, wonderful guy called Eric Doyle. And he started by describing the complete and utter contingency and dependence of a baby first on the umbilical cord in the womb hanging by a thread, as it were, and then as the newly born baby, how that little being only exists because of its parents because of the love of its parents for each other, and can only be known, sustained, given any sense of idea or word or language or identity by the love of that parent.

It can do nothing to help itself. It can't even turn over, you know. And in the womb, it can do nothing but be suspended, as it were, in a provision which is not its own.

So, I thought, I thought you are perfectly describing how I feel now at this immense holy presence. And I'm this little contingent being hanging off the edge of it, which is good for me to know, it's an important lesson that you're not the center of the world.

So, I thought he was going to say, that is how we are with God, right? He set it up, you know, and then he turned, and he could have been looking at me directly.

He said, you think I'm going to say, that is how we are with God. And in one respect, in the sheer order of creation, that is true. He is the Creator; we are the creature.

However, that's not what I'm going to say. What I'm going to tell you is the astonishing and revolutionary idea that that is how God chooses to be with us. It's God who out of sheer love becomes the child in the womb of Mary, dangling by the umbilical cord utterly.

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It's God who's born as the little baby and lying in the straw. He could be kicked by the oxen or the ass, you know, He depends utterly on His human parents. And then He said, why does He do that? And he said, because if you really love somebody, you cannot love from a height, you can't tower over somebody and have a loving relationship with them.

That's why people, that's why men get on their knees when they propose. I mean, we need to be alongside one another to love one another. And we absolutely need both parties to be vulnerable.

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Andrew Stirling: That, Malcolm, is the sort of the uniqueness of the Incarnation. That is what drives home.

When I, just to divert a second for a moment, when I look at your sonnets, Malcolm, and I've been privileged to read them, and these are, for those who don't know, are available for people to read within the context of an overall liturgy and within the overall reading of Scripture. I'd just like to read one back to you. It struck me, and I

just love your comment on this, because I really think this shows just how you integrate Scripture into your poetic work.

It really is fitting in the light of what you've just said. It's called *Love's Choice*.

> *This bread is like dissolving almost air, a little visitation on my tongue, a wafer-thin sensation hardly there.*
>
> *This taste of wine is brief in flavor flung, a moment to the palate's roof and fled, even its aftertaste a memory. Yet this is how He comes, through wine and bread. Love chooses to be emptied intimately.*
>
> *He does not come in unimagined light, too bright to be denied, too absolute for consciousness, too strong for sight.*
>
> *Leaving the seer blind, the poet mute, chooses instead to seep into each sense, to dye himself into experience.*

Beautiful, beautiful.

Malcolm Guite: Well, you were right to say the word incarnate. That's a poem about receiving Holy Communion. But it is by extension or by derivation a poem about the Incarnation.

I'm riffing on the Philippians passage, you know, “though he was found in form equal to God, he did not cling to equality with God, but emptied himself, taking the form.”

So, it might interest you to know, in a sense, that poem also goes back, I mean, again, that poem is the fruit of long experience of being a communicant Anglican, but I have to say that it goes back also to this moment of revelation. When I heard this little Franciscan friar say this, tell me that God had become fully human because he loved us enough to love us alongside and from within, the penny dropped.

And it's not that I ceased to think that God was awesomely holy and transcendent, but I suddenly knew not only that He was human, but I actually felt for the first time in my

life that it was okay to be human. Do you know what I mean? All my existentialist angst was based on the cosmos and we're these tiny quivering specks at the edge of everything with no significance. So, I'd always been rather browbeaten by cosmic dimension and the inadequacy of being human.

But here I've got, if it's good enough for God, it's good enough for me and I'll be a human being. But then this guy, before he finished, he said, and if God makes himself helpless as the babe in the manger, how much more helpless does He make himself when He puts the whole of who He is into your hands in the bread and the wine? You could take that wafer and spit on it. You could grind it under your heel.

He's defenseless, but that's how love comes to us, defenseless. And I just thought, okay. So, I went back to the chaplain and said, okay, I think I can say the Gloria now.

But yeah, that of course gave me a chance to read the Scripture again. And this time really let it read me and really, you know, and that's why I think almost all my poetry in one way or another is arising out of meditation on Scripture. I mean, there are lots of them.

Like I have a sequence of 50 sonnets on the sayings of Jesus where I'm looking at a specific text, but there are others, apparently not about anything, you know, there might be a, might be a love poem, but almost always there's a sort of sense of the generative power to my imagination of the Scriptures as I read them. I see the Scriptures as a wellspring that flows out into you and through you rather than as a sort of contained system that you go into occasionally.

Andrew Stirling: Beautiful.

In terms of, we know your poetic works, but you're also a musician and you have an important ministry of music and you're going to be collaborating, I understand with Stephen Bell, who we've interviewed here on one of our podcasts. I'm glad you did. He's a great man.

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Great man. And he supported us in Bible Society events in which I've spoken and so on. How, Malcolm, does music help express and share the faith?

Malcolm Guite: So, I mean, that's a very big question.

The guy who really knows the answer to that is you.

Andrew Stirling: I realize that. I put you on the hot seat, Malcolm.

Malcolm Guite: I think one of the reasons why I love poetry specifically is that it's the part of the English language that aspires to the condition of music, that by having rhythm, by having meter, by having rhyme, it becomes quasi-musical. And in fact, of course, it began as music. It began, you know, with people with lyres and harps.

And in fact, when I was looking for poetry of the kind that I loved in the Romantics and could not find among contemporary poets in the 70s or 80s, print page poets, I discovered that it was musicians like Leonard Cohen and Neil Young and Bob Dylan and Van Morrison to me who were bringing poetry off the page and with instruments into the world. So, I think that's important. But I do think that music provides a kind of beauty which is necessary, particularly when we're dealing with difficult things.

When we're dealing with grief, for example, we don't want jagged, broken cries all the time. We want some kind of music to undergird our pain and lift it up a little bit and give it dignity and beauty. And sometimes it's only the beauty that helps us bear the grief.

I mean, I think that's why elegy is so important. And I think in English music and poetry, I think there's always a slightly elegiac strain. I'm very much admiring.

And one of the things I had the chance to do with Steve. So, Steve Bell and I met and began to work together in around 2010, I think. And so, we've had 15 years to do this.

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And he would take a poem of mine. And what I loved about what he would do is he wouldn't just follow the meter and order that I'd given the poem. He'd re-imagine the whole thing as a song.

He might take the final couplet of a sonnet and make it the chorus of the song. And I told him very early on, do that. I'm not precious about this.

The poem will still be a poem. And what I felt was that he was using music to bring out new contours, new heights and depths, new aspects of meaning in the poem itself. You know, Seamus Heaney has a lovely poem about different wells and how they're a parallel for ways of writing poetry.

And he says, some had echoes, gave back your own voice with a clean new music in it. And I feel very much that's what Steve Bell does with my poems.

Andrew Stirling: Yeah, that's beautiful.

You're going to be coming to Canada and to the Lester Randall Preaching Fellowship. And you and Stephen are going to be performing for us. And I know everyone's looking forward to this, Malcolm, very much.

In terms of you coming here and our time is coming to a close, but tell us a little bit about what you're going to be speaking about there, because I know there are people who are going to be listening to this podcast, looking forward to hearing you. Can you give us just a foretaste, just a crumb on which we can chew for a moment?

Malcolm Guite: So, I think since I'm a poet and also a preacher in the sense that I was a lay preacher in the Church of England before I was ordained, and obviously as a priest, you know, that's my bread and butter. What is it to preach the Word of God? What does that mean? How do you do it? So, I think I'm going to try and talk about how the work of a poet, and the work of a preacher come together.

I happen to be both, but I think every preacher is engaged in a kind of poetry. I'm going to take a look at particularly what Shakespeare has to say about poetry. You

may remember the famous comments in Midsummer Night's Dream where he says, “the poet I in fine frenzy rolling doth glance from heaven to earth from earth to heaven.”

And this is the key thing. As imagination bodies forth the form of things unknown, the poet's pen takes them, turns them to shapes. And here's the key, gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name.

Now that's really a kind of incarnation to take something that was floating around that might come in and turn it to a shape and give it a body and something local and a name, you know, that you could say it is just about having illustrations. It's not quite as simple as a memorable illustration, because some memorable illustrations, you remember the illustration, but you can't for your life if you remember what it was illustrating, you know.

Andrew Stirling: Happens to preachers, by the way, yes.

Malcolm Guite: A really good statement or a really good poem gives you, imagines something for you or helps you to imagine it, which you can return to again and again, and which is rich and emblematic and kind of bigger on the inside than the outside. And so, I'm going to talk about how poets do that, what's involved in that, and then try and apply that to the way we read Scripture and the way we preach from Scripture.

Andrew Stirling: Oh, brilliant. Yes. Well, I'll be there cheering you on and listening to you intently, Malcolm, as I'm sure others will do too.

I always end our discussions with one question, and it began with the very first podcast we did of a person who worked in street ministry and who himself was terminally ill. But it doesn't have to be negative. But everyone I've asked the same question; how can we pray for you and your work? What would you like us to pray for Malcolm Guide at this moment in your life?

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Malcolm Guite: Well, thank you.

And I do value prayers immensely. I know the difference they make. Well, perhaps I can answer that by telling you that I once did a retreat where I had to finish the retreat through a series of exercises and discernment by writing a single sentence that summed up what I thought God had put me on earth to do.

Once I'd written this sentence, I thought, why didn't I see it before? So, if I tell you my sentence, then you'll know you'll be praying for me to do this thing and not get distracted by things. So, I discovered that what God had put me on earth to do was to use my love of language and facility for it to kindle my own and other people's imagination for Christ. That's it.

It's about love of language. It's about kindling the imagination for Christ. Lots of people can do rational apologetics, and I think that's great.

And expository sermons are great. But I want to win and baptize the imagination of my hearer and kindle it for Christ. So, there's a lot of other stuff I do that isn't doing that.

You know, there's all the hassle of planning trips and going and traveling. And the danger is that I become exhausted by the peripheries and then don't have the energy for the central thing. So, if you and your listeners can pray that I will find the ways and be given by God the strength to kindle my own and other people's imaginations for Christ, that'll be more than enough.

Andrew Stirling: To which I say, Amen. Amen. Excellent.

Well, thank you so much, Malcolm. As I said, I look forward to seeing you. I know people will have loved hearing you.

I'm sure you're a deep well from which people can draw, and I do hope they will go on and read some of your sonnets and some of your other works because they really

are most inspiring. But I really appreciate your time. And as I said, I look forward to meeting you in person in the near future.

Malcolm Guite: Yes, I look forward to that too. Thank you very much, Andrew.

Andrew Stirling: Anyway, God bless you, Malcolm, and thank you so much for your time with us.

Malcolm Guite: My pleasure.